

# Title: Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) Annual Report 2023-24

**Date: 14 May 2024**

| **Purpose:** | Decision |
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| **How does this link with our corporate priorities of improving biodiversity or delivering nature-based solutions to climate change:** | Our Corporate Plan requires a foundation of sound science to underpin NatureScot policy. The SAC provides peer review of complex areas of science and acts as a ‘critical friend’, drawing on expertise in the natural and social sciences, and synergistically works with staff to provide robust advice and evidence. |
| **Summary:** | This paper presents a summary of the activities of the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) between April 2023 and March 2024. The SAC met twice:  September 18, 2023  March 18, 2024  Sub-groups addressed issues relating to targets and monitoring, deer, muirburn and Avian Influenza. |
| **Recommendations:** | Board is asked to endorse the ongoing activities of the SACand its subgroups. |
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| **Sponsor:** | Pete Higgins |

## Purpose

1. This paper summarises activities of the Scientific Advisory Committee in 2023-24. The aim of the report is to brief the Board on the work of the SAC.

## Changes to the committee

1. We undertook a recruitment for a new committee member and new members of the Expert Panel. Kathy Dale was appointed to join the committee. Two new members were appointed to the Expert Panel: Professor Rob Briers, an expert on aquatic ecosystems at Edinburgh Napier University; and Dr Roy Neilson, an expert on plant-soils interactions at the James Hutton Institute.

## Meetings

1. The SAC met on 18 September 2023 and 18 March 2024. [Minutes](https://www.nature.scot/about-naturescot/board-directors-and-committees/scientific-advisory-committee) of the SAC meetings are available on our website.
2. The papers at the **September 2023** meeting included: Horizon Scanning on marine issues; an SAC Sub-group update; Board/SAC meeting feedback; and Case Studentships in NatureScot. There was also an information paper on the indirect drivers of biodiversity loss report. Professor Wayne Powell gave a presentation and led a discussion with the SAC on Building Systems Thinking into how NatureScot commissions research and evidence work. The SAC also considered a paper on climate change and sea surface temperatures.
3. The papers at the **March 2023** meeting included: Horizon Scanning; Managing Uncertainty; Protected Areas Monitoring Reform; and NatureScot’s Science and Evidence Needs. There were also information papers on SAC Sub-groups; HPAI Update; and Understanding Public Attitudes and Behaviours. The Committee heard from Professor Sallie Baillie (Scottish Government) on recent RESAS work on land management. The SAC also considered papers looking at how we assess cumulative impact of wind farms on birds.

## Subgroups

1. The SAC currently has several **sub-groups**, which delve deeper into specific issues. Sub-groups are set up in a time-limited format depending on the topic and may include members of SAC’s Expert Panel and/or external experts, as well as normally at least two members of SAC. Groups of interest this year and current work ongoing are:
2. **Targets and Monitoring** – this is a new group that was set up in September 2023 and is chaired by Professor Marian Scott. This group was created to advise NatureScot and Scottish Government on target topics for the Natural Environment Bill and also on the monitoring framework for the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan. The group met in September and will be meeting again through 2024.
3. **Deer** – this is a new group that was set up following discussions at the March 2023 meeting. The group is chaired by Professor Neil Metcalfe and is to advise on deer related research and evidence requirements. The group met in February 2024 and in March when they advised on developing population modelling work.
4. **Avian Influenza** – the final report has been completed and the work of this group, chaired by Professor Dan Haydon, has been concluded. This work proved extremely valuable in underpinning guidance on undertaking research and management in vulnerable colonies and defining research and evidence gaps to tackle the outbreak. NatureScot staff have continued to draw on the expertise of individuals on the group to advise on work.
5. **Muirburn** - this group, chaired by Professor Marian Scott, was set up to support staff on science matters in connection with the [Wildlife Management (Grouse) Bill](https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-scotland-consultation/pages/1/) relating to [muirburn](https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-scotland-consultation/pages/5/) issues. The Group helped colleagues working on the detailed provisions in the Bill, ensuring they were built on available evidence and supported an adaptive management approach. The final report has been produced and a paper taken to the Board in October 2023.
6. The SAC subgroups often work on high profile areas where NatureScot is seeking additional scientific input. For example, recent reports from the Muirburn and HPAI sub-groups have been helpful in providing advice to staff, the NatureScot Board, Scottish Government and to our partners.

## Board/SAC meeting

1. The SAC met with the Board in February 2024. Workshop discussions were held to review the knowledge gaps and science needs for implementing the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy; and how the SAC can support work to address these. There was also a discussion on a proposal to develop evidence briefs on key topics and consideration of how to maximise their value and impact.

## Terms of Reference

1. The terms of reference for the SAC and Expert Panel were reviewed this year and approved by the Board in March. The main change was to add the option for the SAC to meet more frequently, with scope for two to three additional online meetings. These would be informal sessions including workshops for more in depth exploration of complex issues.

## Other SAC activities

1. Individual members of the SAC and Expert Panel, and the Chair review drafts of scientifically novel or contentious NatureScot-commissioned research reports as part of our editorial Quality Assurance process. Members have also contributed to a range of internal discussions including work on species and monitoring and actively support our Science and Evidence Leadership Programme.
2. As part of the Science and Evidence Programme in NatureScot, SAC members have been invited to join a mentoring scheme for NatureScot staff.